

Collective Absolution, Practised Dubiety, Ersatz Ethics and Permanent Positions: An Exploration of Moral Blindness in Contemporary Collecting

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Abstract

Consumer collecting (CC) and collectors have predominantly been evaluated through the lens of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. It is a billion-dollar industry but to date no research has explored acts of moral blindness (MB) within the field of collecting. Adopting a yearlong participative observation, the data reveals that collectors volitionally, wilfully, and permanently neglect moral considerations when acquiring items to achieve their goals.

500 Word Overview

Collecting is categorized by the need for investment, enjoyment, personal expression, and hunting (Belk, 1994; 2009; 2013; 2014). Collecting is a hobby, a pastime, a passion and for some their *raison d'être*. Most areas of popular collecting are dominated by middle income categories, including stamps (Bryant, 1989), baseball cards (Rogoli, 1991), model airplanes (Butsch, 1984), beer cans (Soroka, 1988), and "instant collectibles" such as limited-edition plates (Roberts, 1990) but the above fascination has seen collecting evolve and society has been presented with opportunities to collect well beyond the mundane including fields such as 'Murderabilia'. Additionally, research on war, warfare and soldiering has acknowledged a *matériel* culture (Gregson et al., 2009) creating value regimes (Appadurai, 1986) as objects are exploited to incorporate an assemblage of meanings (legal, personal, ideological) to elicit collector responses. Given that the unimaginable suffering associated with such item the work seeks to explore individual and collective moral parameters in the collecting field. We do this through the lens of moral blindness. Moral blindness is the "temporary inability of a decision maker to see the ethical dimension of a decision at stake" (Palazzo et al., 2012, p. 325). Individuals affected by moral blindness enter "a state of unintended unethicity" and are unaware that they deviate from their moral values or engage in immoral activity (p. 325).

To explore MB in CC we undertook a yearlong participative observation conducted at military fairs, antique shows, and exhibitions across the UK. Field notes, researcher diaries and 65 interviews revealed that there is no mandate for moral practice within collecting communities. Collector communities are free from 'ethical dilemmas', underpinned by a collective absolution and in extremis a denial that there is a necessity for moral perspectives when dealing with the past. Consequently, collectors seemingly become immunised from the symbolism and dark heritage of items associated with war, genocide, fascism, and authoritarian regimes. Moreover, the data proffers that 'ethical thinking' and 'difficult' conversations can lead to 'exposure' and 'exclusion' from certain communities. But above all, and our major contribution our data reveals that MB is a permanent state in CC offering a contradictory position to the notion that MB is temporary (Lois and Wessa, 2021; Gonin et al., 2012; Palazzo et al., 2012). Personal and contextual factors supersede moral concerns in the pursuit of desired items and there is an acute awareness of being morally blind.

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